



Teacher commitment: Exploring associations with relationships and emotions



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers adapted differently depending on the relationships.
- The student–teacher relationships showed an emotional path to commitment.
- Only colleague relationships were directly associated with commitment.
- Relationships with principals and commitment were weakly mediated by emotions.

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to provide greater insight into the connections between teachers' relationships with people inside and outside schools and teacher commitment. The possible mediating role of teacher emotions was also examined. The significant connections between teachers' relationships and teacher commitment appeared to differ according to teachers' relationships. The current findings revealed that teachers exhibit particular adaptation behaviors toward students, principals, colleagues, and local educational authorities. The direct and indirect connections between relationships and commitment were distinguished, and they helped to clarify the mixed and ambiguous results from previous research.

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1. Introduction

Research on teacher commitment has been carried out in the context of two distinct concerns regarding teaching and teacher policies. The first involves ensuring a high level of teacher effort to support school effectiveness, and the second pertains to the retention of teachers (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001). The distinction between these two concerns helps in understanding the contextual meaning of specific research, as well as the way that teacher commitment is conceptualized and measured.

The first of these two concerns has received international attention amid a state of criticism and pressure against teachers who fail to ensure quality education. Internationally, there is a degree of similarity in social contexts involving a lowered public

trust in the teaching profession and an elevated accountability movement (Bascia & Rottmann, 2011; Fullan, 2000; Owens, 2004; Park & Jeong, 2013; Whitty, 2000). Researchers with this concern tried to draw out policy implications for an improvement in teacher performance (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988; Park, 2005; Razak, Darmawan, & Keeves, 2010). Reports of original research on this topic in international journals across the world (e.g., the United States, Canada, Australia, Belgium, Israel, Hong Kong [China], Singapore, and Malaysia) highlight the international attention that this concern has received.

The importance of the second concern is evidenced by high teacher turnover across countries (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Peters & Pearce, 2012). For example, in many European countries, teachers tend to retire from their profession as soon as they are offered an opportunity to do so through a pension package (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2012). In the United States (US), the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) reported that, in 2003, approximately one third of America's new teachers leave the teaching profession

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sometime during their first three years of employment (NCTAF, 2007). Comparatively, more researchers have incorporated this concern into their research in the US than in other countries (Dee, Henkin, & Singleton, 2006; Henkin & Holliman, 2009; Price & Collett, 2012; Ware & Kitsantas, 2011).

Policy makers have tried a diversity of programs in order to cope with problems pertaining to each concern alone and in combination (Day et al., 2005; Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Owens, 2004). However, policies that were intended to improve teacher commitment have often resulted in non-uniform or unsatisfactory outcomes (Coburn, 2001; Day et al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2004; Terhart, 2013; van Veen & Slegers, 2006). Teachers often feel frustrated with the attitudes of education reformers, whereas those who attempt to enact reforms are often disappointed in teachers' apparently capricious resistance to change (Day & Leitch, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2005; Park & Jeong, 2013; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). This is likely because emotional filters may play a role in the assimilation of mandated reforms to school practices (Cross & Hong, 2009; Harper, 2012; Lee & Yin, 2011).

The reactions of teachers engaged in educational innovations have highlighted the emotional and relational dimensions of teacher commitment (Crawford, 2007; Malm, 2009; O'Connor, 2008; Peters & Pearce, 2012). Accordingly, teachers are perceived as social-psychological organisms who display complex responses based on their understanding of specific circumstances (Coburn, 2001; Louis, 1998; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). There are therefore challenges that research concerning teacher commitment has to (a) investigate relational and emotional factors as antecedents of commitment, and (b) apply a theoretical model of the commitment process that views teachers as cognitive and affective actors rather than "closed-circuit" and passive recipients. These two research foci are closely bound with and supplemented by each other, and therefore both are important for deepening the understanding of teacher commitment. However, very few studies have addressed both of these topics simultaneously. The primary reasons for this scarcity of research appear to be that (a) the study of commitment has been inappropriately conducted within the context of leadership rather than with the aim of understanding teachers themselves (Jackson, Meyer, & Wang, 2013), and (b) research concerning teacher emotions, which are key to the commitment mechanism, has predominantly involved qualitative methods (Saunders, 2013).

Although prior research has been conducted with respect to the cognitive and affective aspects of teachers' relationships, interpersonal relationships in school environments have only been sporadically examined and covered partially as study variables (Coladarc, 1992; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011; Price, 2012; Price & Collett, 2012; Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013). Little is known about how teacher–student relationships contribute to teacher commitment, apart from their influence on teacher emotions and students' lives (Hargreaves, 2000; Newberry & Davis, 2008; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011; Veldman et al., 2013). Similarly, there is scant knowledge of how teachers' relationships with local educational authorities influence teacher commitment, although some influence is feasible in the context of persisting school reforms (Darby, 2008; Day et al., 2005; Kelchtermans, 2005; van Veen & Slegers, 2006).

As an exceptional case, Henkin and Holliman (2009) investigated a range of relationships for inclusion as antecedents of commitment, but did not include that between teachers and local educational authorities. Thus, it was difficult to discern whether the reported influence of specific relationships on commitment were substantial, given the restricted range of relationships studied. In a more comprehensive study, Louis (1998) included

relationships with the district office, but collapsed the different kinds of relationships into a single construct, making it difficult to differentiate which relationships had influences on teacher commitment.

Given the challenges in concurrently studying the range of teacher relationships, research must more actively focus on the process of teacher commitment (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Schutz & DeCuir, 2002; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; van Veen, Slegers, & van de Ven, 2005). Only having knowledge of antecedents is comparable to having a tool, but not knowing how to use it. Given that emotions are accompanied by adaptive and functional effects, this topic has been partly addressed by research concerning the emotional aspects of teachers' lives (Hargreaves, 2001; O'Connor, 2008; Schutz, Aultman, & Williams-Johnson, 2009; Smith & Mackie, 2010). However, it is uncommon to employ a social-psychological model to explain commitment mechanisms in school settings (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). One notable exception is Ebmeier's (2003) research explaining teacher efficacy and commitment using a paradigm based on a social cognitive model; however, it provides an explanation for the development and sustainment of teacher efficacy, but not commitment. Two other exceptional studies (Price, 2012; Price & Collett, 2012) nested the endogenous process of affect theory in their models, but reported many direct effects between study variables alongside the indirect connections predicted by the models. Although these direct findings were unexpected, they provide support for a model that contains direct and indirect links between teachers' relationships and teacher commitment. Importantly, this would allow researchers to capture the differentiated role of teacher emotions among different kinds of relationships (Ebmeier, 2003; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

The current study extensively investigates teachers' relationships (engagement with students, colleagues, principals, and local educational authorities) as antecedents of teacher commitment, with teacher emotions as a mediator. Primary attention is paid to which relationships are connected with teacher commitment by either direct or indirect paths, or by both paths simultaneously, through the lens of a theory-based model. The study also assesses the mixed findings in prior research regarding the relative influence of teacher–colleague and teacher–principal relationships as they pertain to teacher commitment (Coladarc, 1992; Ebmeier, 2003). The results may provide important implications for teaching conditions and teacher education.

This study took place in South Korea, where top-down school reforms have persisted in the areas of school governance and teacher performance, in reference to examples in Western countries, since the 1995 presidential initiative toward a new educational system (Presidential Advisory Committee on Education Reform, 1995). Though teacher turnover remains minimal, highly experienced teachers have seriously begun to consider retiring before the official retirement age, because of difficulties with student discipline and increased demand for accountability (Kim, 2012). As a result, policy connections between Korea and Western countries have become increasingly tight. Thus, the results of this study may provide the explanations of teacher commitment from an international perspective.

Before moving to the next section, a short explanation on the local educational authorities needs to be added. In South Korea, local governments are established at two levels: 17 higher administrative districts and 226 lower administrative districts. Affairs related to education in local governments are typically conducted at the higher administrative district level. For this study, local educational authorities refer to the independent offices governed by superintendents in higher administrative districts.

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